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Book of Mormon

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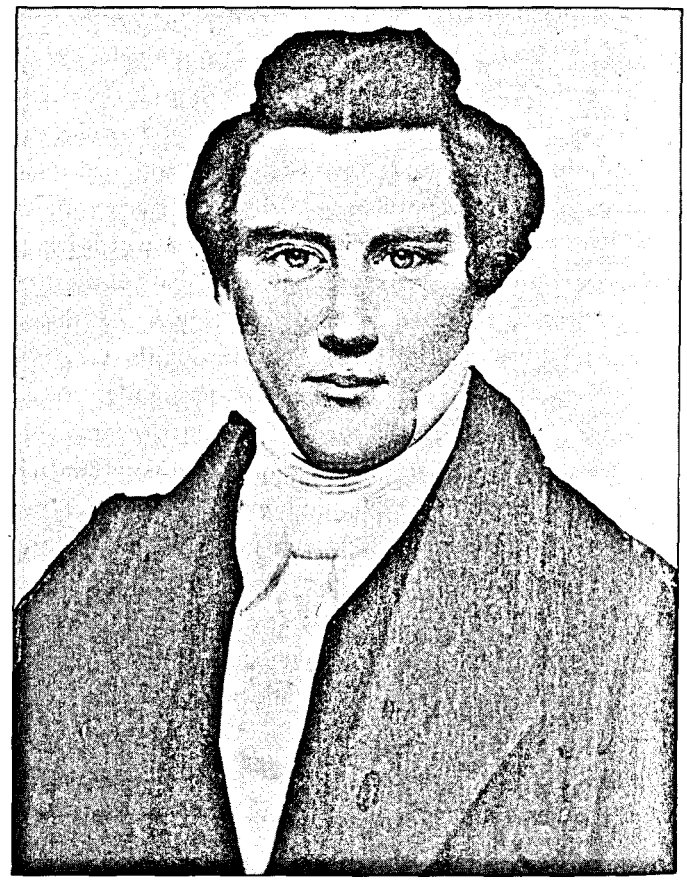
Black Nationalist Movements

See *New Religious Movements: Black Nationalist Movements.*

Book of Mormon

On the March 26, 1830, the *Wayne Sentinel,* the village newspaper of Palmyra, New York, printed an advertisement under the heading "The Book of Mormon." The advertisement reproduced the title page of the book in question, which had created a considerable stir in the area months before its publication, followed by a simple announcement: "The above work, containing about 600 pages, large Duodecimo, is now for sale, whole-sale and retail, at the Palmyra Bookstore, by HOWARD & GRANDIN." This announcement heralded the publication of what would become the most widely distributed book in American history, save only the Bible. And that publication was the immediate prelude to the organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, organized on April 6. That same church has consistently relied, from the day of its founding to the present, on the Book of Mormon as the principal agent of conversion to the gospel it preached.



Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon religion, said he experienced a personal visitation of God the Father and Jesus Christ in 1820, at the age of fourteen. Subsequent visions revealed to him the location, near his New York home, of engraved golden plates, which he translated into the Book of Mormon.

An Ancient American Epic

The Book of Mormon could be said to have two points of origin, each setting in motion events that would converge on the March day of publication when a new "American Bible" altered the face of American religious history. The point of first origin is described by the record itself as a year of turbulence in the ancient city of Jerusalem. A man named Lehi is called by God to preach repentance to a rebellious populace. The people reject him, God commands him to flee with his family, and Lehi and his clan escape both the anger of the crowd and the ensuing Babylonian bondage (c. 600 BCE). After some years in the wilderness, Lehi's group migrates, by ship, to the New World, where his son Nephi assumes the leadership and begins to maintain a record of his people on metal plates. Essentially a tribal history, the record is kept by Nephi and his descendents for the next thousand years, chronicling the rise and collapse of a civilization of Nephites, who are plagued with recurrent internal strife, cycles of prosperity and spiritually debilitating pride, and warfare with a dissenting branch called Lamanites.

The record also details the religion of these people, who follow the Mosaic law, even as they anticipate the coming of a Messiah they refer to by name as Jesus Christ. After his death and resurrection in the Old World, the record claims, this same Christ appears to a group of righteous Nephites, preaches his gospel, and organizes a church—all along the pattern detailed in the New Testament—before departing into heaven and leaving his New World disciples to enjoy several generations of utopian peace, before the descent into their final cataclysm begins. In the early fifth century, after witnessing the utter destruction of his people, Moroni, a Nephite general and the last record keeper of the plates, seals up his record and buries it in the earth.

Joseph Smith

The modern history of the Book of Mormon could be said to begin in 1820. That was the year that a young Joseph Smith (1805–1844), one of thousands of seekers searching out true religion in the era of the Second Awakening,

claimed to have experienced a personal visitation of God the Father and Jesus Christ in response to his earnest entreaties for spiritual guidance. Although Smith depicted this visitation at the time and apparently ever after as largely a personal conversion narrative, the experience ushered him into a career of epiphanies and angelic visitations. In 1823 the same Moroni who had buried the sacred record in the fifth century appeared to Smith as a resurrected being, relating to him the history of the Nephites and the buried plates. After four years of tutelage, Smith was permitted to retrieve the plates from a repository he was directed to, in a hillside near his home in Palmyra, New York. Along with the plates, he found an instrument called "interpreters," which consisted of two clear stones in a silver setting, that functioned for him as seer stones and that enabled him to translate the writing on the plates.

Slowed by his own intractable poverty, encumbered with supporting a new family, and distracted by the curiosity and harassment of outsiders that at times became violent, Smith made slow progress with the translation. The first portion of 116 pages was stolen in the summer of 1828, and he began the process again. The arrival of Oliver Cowdery, a young schoolteacher, who volunteered to serve as scribe, initiated a burst of productivity in the spring of 1829, and in June of that year Smith completed the work. That same month, Cowdery and ten others were shown the plates, which until then Smith alone had been permitted to see and handle. In their published testimony, the first three witnesses describe how the plates were laid before their eyes by "an angel of God [who] came down from heaven." Although they were close enough to the relics to see "the engravings thereon," as they twice tell us, they neither touched nor handled them for themselves. The other eight witnesses, on the other hand, were allowed to handle the plates and draw their own conclusions. The plates, they write, did indeed have "the appearance of gold," and the engravings had "the appearance of an ancient work," for "we did handle [them] with our hands."

Old Wine in New Bottles?

The content of the Book of Mormon is a striking mix of the familiar and the unexpected. Beginning as it does in a scene of Jerusalem prophets, it invites immediate comparison with the Judeo-Christian scriptures. The notion of ancient Israelites in the New World is patently strange, as is the idea of people worshipping a Christ whose coming is hundreds of years in the future. At the same time, the "doctrine of Christ" taught by Book of Mormon prophets was both familiar and appealing, especially in an age full of restorationists and primitivists (religious seekers who craved a return to the Christianity described by the New Testament). Faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, baptism for the remission of sins, and the gift of the Holy Ghost are all affirmed as core principles. One striking departure from orthodox teachings is the Book of Mormon's repudiation of the doctrine of original sin, and the recasting of the biblical Eden story as a "fortunate fall":

> And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created must have remained in the same state in which they were after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and had no end. And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin. But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things. Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy. (2 Nephi 2:23–25)

Another motif in the Book of Mormon is even more fundamental to the religion the scripture launched. That is the principle of individual, dialogic revelation. Like the Old Testament deity, the God of the Book of Mormon engages in frequent interaction with prophets—directing, counseling, and commanding. The Book of Mormon God, however, extends those acts of literal communication and interaction to a new level. God directs inquiring generals where to attack and hungry patriarchs where to hunt, provides doctrinal understanding to the piously curious on issues from infant baptism to the spirit world, reassures anxious parents about their children, or directs high priests in how to resolve ecclesiastical conundrums. Time and again, "the voice of the Lord" is heard, at times repeatedly and insistently, in the face of resistance or spiritual obtuseness. No vague intimations, these, but articulate, conversational episodes fill the pages of the Book of Mormon, making God's interaction at the level of personal concern a dominant leitmotif.

Other themes are similarly adaptations or modifications of familiar biblical ones. God's covenant with Israel is almost as central a topic here as in the Old Testament, with the additional urgency that it would naturally have to a people

dispossessed and a hemisphere away from the promised land. And that promised land itself proves to be a highly portable concept, shifting from Jerusalem to the New World, and through successive phases of habitation and divinely directed resettlement, as war and dissension drive the people of God deeper and deeper into an alien wilderness. Scripture proves to be of such consummate value that lives are hazarded and even taken to preserve it. And reinforcing the splintering and expansion of the Christian canon that the Book of Mormon physically embodies, the record emphasizes the endless proliferation of scripture: "for behold, I shall speak unto the Jews and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the Nephites and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it" (Nephi 29:12).

Debates and Reception

The claims made by the Book of Mormon were at the same time occasion for both eager anticipation and vehement denunciation. Even before the book was published and available, reports of a new record purporting to be scripture inflamed public opinion. For many who had been anxiously expecting marvelous works and signs in evidence of a Christian renewal presided over by God's spirit, the Book of Mormon was the "marvelous work and a wonder," the "ensign to the nations" foreseen by the prophet Isaiah. But for more of the public, its very existence was a blasphemous affront to a Christianity believing its canon to be closed and its Bible solely sufficient. That fact, and the sheer unlikelihood of its two stories—the one involving seafaring Israelites and the other gold plates and angels—meant that few investigations into Book of Mormon historicity rose to the level of actual analysis of the evidence. Proponents appealed to spiritual confirmation—a witness "borne of the spirit"—and opponents dismissed it on prima facie grounds.

The earliest support mustered for the Book of Mormon was in the form of affidavits from the eleven witnesses who testified they had seen the plates, published in every copy of the Book of Mormon from 1830 to the present. With the discovery of impressive ruins, including temple complexes and magnificent remains in Central America, popularized by John Lloyd Stephens in the 1840s, Mormons gained confidence that archaeology supported their view of the Book of Mormon as a record of now vanished civilizations. By the 1920s, however, the first real difficulties with the Book of Mormon were coming to the fore. Principal among these were the variety of American Indian languages, which could hardly have evolved from a Hebraic precursor, especially in the short span of two millennia, and the mention in the Book of Mormon of apparent anachronisms, including the horse, steel, and silk. Environmental explanations that trace the Book of Mormon to nineteenth-century contexts have largely displaced early attempts to link its authorship to works by two nineteenth-century figures, Solomon Spaulding or Ethan Smith. This kind of criticism, first begun in 1830 and continuing to the present, draws attention to parallels between elements of the Book of Mormon and environmental influences of the period. These included doctrinal preoccupations such as infant baptism and universalism, secret oaths and "combinations" of malevolent groups (reminiscent, to some, of Masons), anti-Catholic intimations, and emotional behavior consistent with nineteenth-century revivalism. Most recently, critics have appealed to DNA evidence for lack of a connection between modern Native Americans and Israelite lines.

Each onslaught has been met by Mormon-mustered evidence and counterarguments, at times attaining a high level of sophistication. Scholars have found parallels between Book of Mormon accounts and Israelite coronation rituals, numerous examples of ancient writing on metal—even gold—plates, etymologies that tie Book of Mormon names to Egyptian and Asiatic derivatives, and chiastic structures—a kind of reverse parallelism typical of ancient Hebrew poetry and quite prevalent in the Book of Mormon. The DNA approach has been largely discredited as misapplied science, especially in light of ungrounded assumptions about the ethnic purity of Book of Mormon peoples and descendents. Finally, dramatic evidence surfaced in Yemen, on the Arabian Peninsula, in the 1990s of stone altars inscribed with the name NHM, apparently corroborating a Book of Mormon place name situated in that same area by the narrative's early pages. Book of Mormon apologists have also reconstructed a historically plausible exodus route for Lehi's trail, and others appeal to the growing group of diffusionists, who argue for multiple sources of New World settlement.

With the growth of Mormonism undiminished at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and the Book of Mormon still featuring prominently as the principal tool of missionary efforts, the influence of the naysayers appears to be negligible. The work of the apologists may be said, in this regard, to have successfully countered the attacks of the critics. More likely, scientific and archaeological approaches

tend to confirm both believers and doubters, who have already drawn their conclusions on the basis of prayerful inquiry or religious presuppositions, as might be said of the Bible's believers and critics. In addition to the Book of Mormon, Smith produced two other works that consisted of revelations and purported translations of ancient texts, bringing to four the number of scriptures in the Mormon canon: the Holy Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.

See also *Bible* entries; *Great Awakening(s); Latter-day Saints.*

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